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Identifying

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A thesis Report Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IDENTIFYING

by

Barbara J. Di Martini

July, 2002

SIGNATURE PAGE

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To my husband
Joe
for his ever present love,
encouragement, patience and support.

To my children
Danielle, Michael, Joseph and Stacey
who believed in me.

To Tom Lightfoot
who gave me the opportunity.

To Wendy Gwartzman
my first teacher.

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Thesis Proposal

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate what I feel is the disparity between publicly perceived and privately conceived identity. I will attempt to address the juxtaposition of corporeal and metaphysical self perception and whether free will and self actualization are possible when confronted with imposing circumstances. Self creation, whether conscious or unconscious, is a life long proactive process, during which we identify and judge others as we compile our own *vade mecum*.

I will attempt to create a body of work depicting the ramifications of our personal choices on society's perception of our persona and our inability, or unwillingness, to objectively perceive ourselves as others may. However, the validity of any identifying judgments depends on the bias of those making the judgment. Since I wish to simultaneously address the seen and the unseen, it will be crucial and challenging to develop an iconography that clearly defines virtual from actual images.

This thesis arises out of my need to effectively communicate and resolve personal issues. Concepts and inspiration will be drawn from personal experience and developed into a representational artistic vocabulary of texture, color, line and form on two dimensional surfaces.

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Introduction

A short time after I arrived at Rochester Institute of Technology I asked the Chairman of the School of Art what type of thesis was the most advisable for a Master's Candidate: one about techniques or perhaps an exhaustive research paper on a painting style or an in-depth study about an obscure little known artist whom no one has discovered? His response: "No, those are for undergraduate study. A Master's of Fine Arts thesis must be about you; why you are painting your Art." Wow.

An artist should be accustomed to revealing themselves. Every work they produce is the results of tearing a hunk of flesh from themselves, shaping the fragile chunk with inspiration into the fabric with which they clothed their medium of choice. It should be easy by now, but it is not. It is convulsive , exhaustive and like swimming in darkness. To be an artist is to look at the face of God, and think you can actually survive. I love it.

Let the pieces fall where they may.

Iconography for a Political Statement

The photomontage, *Beyond the Rose Garden*, drew inspiration from the events surrounding Bill Clinton, two-term President of the United States, during the years 1997-1998. (pg. 8) Appalling news of his alleged sexual encounters with Monica Lewinsky in the Oval Office, precipitated a long investigation by political watchdogs, including Congress. Testimony from a parade of Washington insiders drew newspaper and electronic coverage. A cover up was underway and it played out on daily television before the world and the American public. A host of loyal supporters attempted to dismiss the alleged charges as unfounded. Many, forced to testify before live television, chose to disclose whatever information they knew. Finally, Clinton, during a televised congressional inquiry attempted to exonerate himself. I felt he was not successful. He was not credible. Yet, for so many people, this master of “good ole boy” hype was able to portray himself as just a regular guy, victimized by a dysfunctional childhood and a wanton 21 year old intern at the White House. He whitewashed himself of any misconduct, and to my chagrin, a faction of society swallowed it.

I was infuriated. For how long would certain powerful people be allowed to dismiss their unethical, self serving behavior, not only as tolerable, but, “normal” because of gender and a “boys will be boys” mentality. This deceit and misuse of

power impacted the lives of the entire country and attacked the structure and ethical fabric of society. This duplicity played before the world like a 2 year long soap opera, absorbing time, money and energy from the business of governing the country and world.

My artistic task was to show Clinton's hypocritical deception, deceit, double dealing abuse of power, mind numbing self absorption and the toll he was taking on the institution of the Presidency. I directed my energy toward creating an iconography that could demonstrate his double standard of behavior and its impact on some of the protagonists inside and outside the White House.

A trip to Venice during Carnival in February, 1998, afforded me the opportunity to photograph and sketch numerous costumes and masks. Masquerade is a disguise or false show. It may also mean to live or act under false pretenses; to hide one's true motives and character.¹ Those who wore venetian carnival masks assumed the postures and personalities of the mask they had donned. It was very clear they believed they had become something other than themselves. In fact, it was difficult to tell the gender, weight or race, never mind the character, vocation or ethics of those in masquerade. Eyes were blackened with stage makeup. Their hands were covered with gloves. They did not speak and the entire body was cloaked in dazzling fabrics and plumage meant to entertain, distract and deceive. Each costumed person relished the limelight; megalomaniacs for attention. Only with careful, prolonged observation could the viewer ascertain possible clues to the most rudimentary of identifying characteristics. The public, however, was not fooled by the elaborate ruse. None

of these artifices was the true identity of the protagonists parading before them. I decided that Venice provided me with an ideal imagery to portray duplicity. These preliminary works solidified the iconography for my thesis.

Venice, a city of intrigue, is vitalized by its ubiquitous canals of water. The waters of Venice originate beyond the confines of the city, flowing through it, defining its essence. Likewise, Washington is a city through which channels and vast streams of power ebb and flow. The origins of power in Washington lie not within the walls of governing institutions, but with the American people who bestow their power upon those institutions and their elected officials. For my work, the waters of Venice would symbolize the flow of power from the American people to their elected officials in Washington .

Medieval Verona, the setting for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, allowed its citizens to protest usury and indict powerful public figures by anonymous deposit of complaints in gargoyle shaped receptacles outside the palaces. I chose the image of an anonymous hand placing a document into one such receptacle to clarify the intent of my work...indictment.

The protagonists in *Beyond the Rose Garden* took on two images: those in masks and those without masks. Masks were assigned to those persons whose behavior and/or words led to doubts about their integrity or to persons whose behavior belied their public image. Masks were also assigned to those who projected conflicting identities. The American public, and those seeking to identify the true character and motives of those in question , would be

represented by faces without masks. I have placed myself behind the wall and flowers on the right-hand side. I am outside the Rose Garden.

Duplicate images of the Rialto Bridge formed an ellipse. (pg.9) I used this structure to imply the shape of the Oval Office. I placed the American flag, which normally hangs on the left side of the room, on the right side and reversed the red, white and blue colors. This inversion represented Clinton's focus on himself and his own welfare rather than the public welfare. Rather than fifty stars on a blue field, a single star on the flag's red field suggests how many were being served by the Office of the President during this time: one? Starr? Clinton? (Kenneth Starr, persistent investigator of the alleged charges and cover-up) .

I replaced the second flag with a pole upon which hang the images of females: the *trophy* pole.(pg. 9) Jennifer Flowers is the pretty mask with the scornful expression. The big nosed harlequin represents Paula Jones. Hillary Clinton, the bottom (first) mask on the trophy pole, emotes joyful oblivion and an admiring, co-dependent gaze towards a ceramic lion with a forked tongue. A few anonymous masks represent those women whose lives have been irreparably altered due to Clinton's behavior, but have been less vocal about the circumstances surrounding their unfortunate experiences. Finally, the golden sunburst with chubby cheeks evokes the image of Monica Lewinsky. Actually, Monica appears three times in the photomontage; twice within the walls of the White House (persecutor) and once outside (victim). Both the black feathered mask with large red lips and the gold sunburst are inside the boundary of the

Rose Garden. Linda Tripp, to whom Monica is whispering, is outside the Rose Garden with her back to the viewer in the lower right corner. Again, Monica is portrayed by the same feathered mask, this time without lips, as a victim in the upper right corner.

Bill Clinton is the fake ceramic lion with the bent, phallus like spigot for a mouth. The forked tongue needs no explanation. The lion, as “king of beasts” aptly categorizes my perception. The Presidential desk is replaced by a sink and drain into which the water, or power of the Presidency, is being wasted as it gushes unchecked from this vacuous personage . The merely decorative aspect of this lion face highlights the insubstantiality of the character.

Beyond the Rose Garden and the crumbling walls of the Oval Office, one has a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty out a window. Bathed in sun, she is a sign American liberty. Again, the statue appears on the garden wall at the left, gray, unclothed and defiled by those who abuse the freedoms for which she stands.

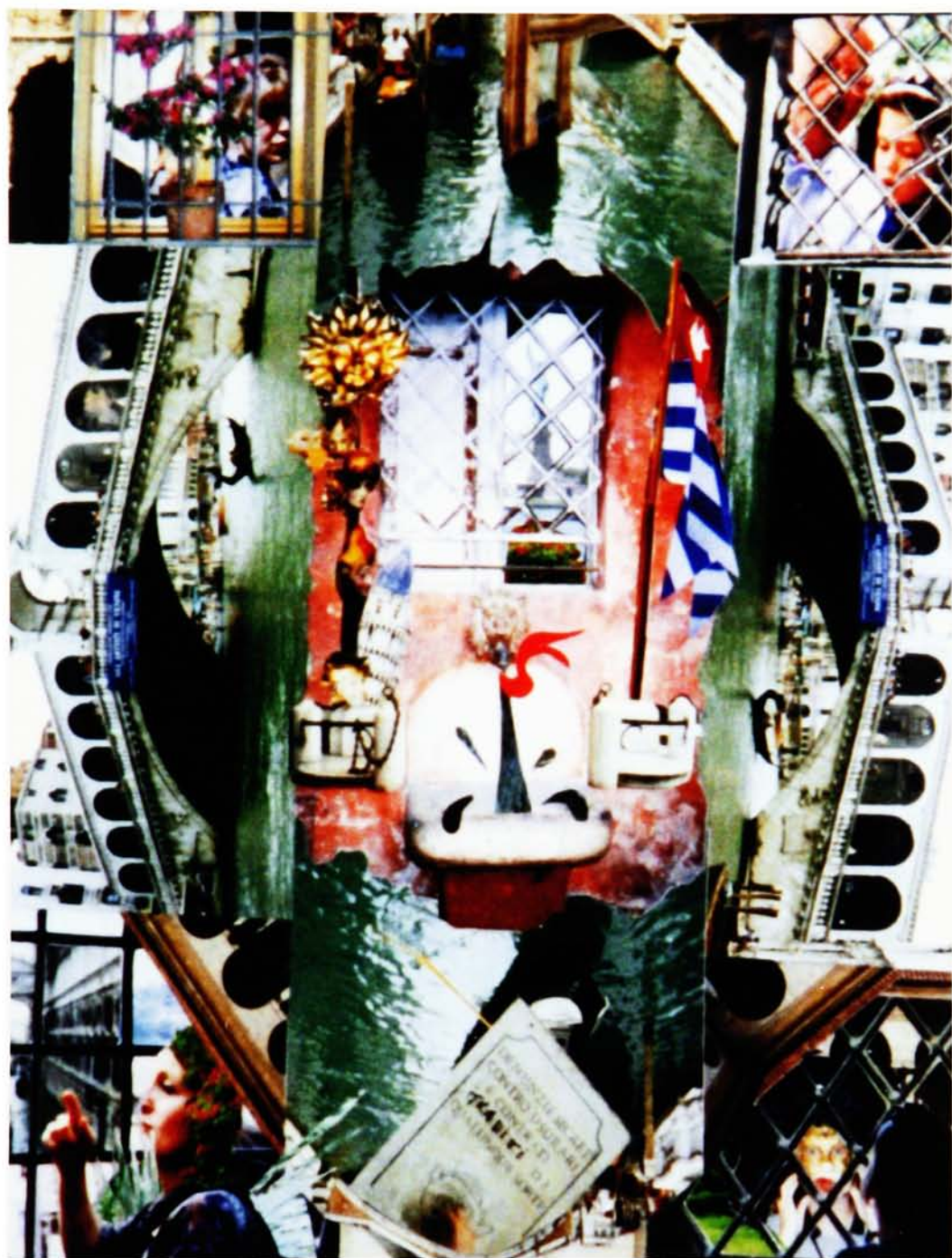
A god, Congress, monitoring the flow of water (power into Washington), implores some unseen authority, decrying the wastes of this Presidential power. Unmasked people of all ages peer into the area from outside the walls of the Garden, their faces twisted with sadness, disbelief, acrimony and exasperation .

Within the Rose Garden, a creature, half human, half vegetable (flowering), rises like a spirit or muse, pointing to the Bridge of Sighs.

Historically, the actual Bridge of Sighs connected the Doge Palace, residency of the *elected* leaders of Venice, to the dungeons and jails across the canal. All who were found guilty of crimes passed from the palace across the bridge into the prison. As they passed over the bridge the wailing and crying, or sighs, of the condemned could be heard emanating the small windows of the bridge. The Muse of the Rose Garden points towards the Bridge of Sighs, and in doing so, implies she has judged the accused and found Clinton guilty.

I used an exacto knife to cut the images from the photographs and glued the pieces on white acid free 140 cold press watercolor paper. The photomontage spills out over the gray and black mat board. This device adds three dimensionality and allows the viewer to enter or exit the composition. Formal balance was a major concern during the construction to avoid visual chaos. The curved edge of the central elliptical structure was repeated in the phallic shapes of the arches on the bridge, the sink, the tomb of Dante, the eyes of the masks, architectural structures, etc. and juxtaposed to the verticals and horizontals of the stone structures outside the confines of the Rose Garden.





Mask Task

"The eyes are the window of the soul" is a 16th century proverb. After more than four centuries, this statement still reflects the popular concept that eyes are so expressive we are actually able to see what people are thinking and feeling just by watching their eyes. Many would suggest eyes without supporting facial features can be misunderstood: it is the face that clarifies whether sad eyes belong to an angry, tired, displeased or sad person. Indeed, one of the ways that we keep our inner selves hidden is by creating a facial expression to mask what our eyes may reveal. Those who are comfortable with themselves spend little conscious effort devising a public countenance: what you see is what you get. There are, however, those whose only countenance is a false facade. They work so hard on this deception that they not only believe their own lie, but are convinced the public is equally duped. Lies are complicated and false appearances are laborious to maintain. Sooner or later the composite image of voice, body language and facial expression doesn't hold together. Red flags go up and people start watching eyes more closely.

These deductions are not unique and I would be a fool to imply I am profound by stating the obvious. We should not find it surprising that the Roman philosopher Cicero, born 106 B.C., writes with lucidity on this subject.

The countenance is the portrait of the soul, and the eyes mark its intentions.

Marcus Tullius Cicero²

Yet, one might find it surprising that after a couple of thousand years we have absorbed so little wisdom, and are still unwilling to incorporate this basic tenet of human behavior in our *vade mecum*, or *manual* by which we live.

We all seem to remember eyes, and the next part of my thesis takes advantage of this fact. First the questions: Are there hidden meanings behind the masks or are the masks hiding nothing? In other words, do masks hide or reveal the secrets of the bearer? Do we all wear a mask and could we achieve self-illumination by *looking into* our mask rather than *look out of* it?

At this point I began drawing elaborate masks without eyes. Much time was spent on small sketches until I was pleased with the value structures. The format was tight, almost smothering, and I offered little information about the setting. A singular recurrent shape, form or line adds unity to each painting. *Jester*, (pg. 14) is painted with a “*da sotto in su*”, from beneath looking up, perspective which exaggerates the undulating, boomerang shapes of the nose, mouth and eyes. The hat and its horns, the ruffled collar and the background shapes repeat the motif. *Bird*, (pg. 15) is drawn from above the subject so as to elongate the oval forms of the eyes, feathers and beak. This lends motion to what might be stagnant forms which now appear to fly off the picture plane. *Web*, (pg. 17) has imagery of lacy lines in the dress, hat and mask surrounding the eyes suggesting webs and intrigue.

I linked one mask to another by using the same palette in all the paintings.

The colors were saturated and I avoided using tube black paint which deadens the light box effect of watercolors. In order to achieve the black eyes, integral to my concept, I glazed ultra marine blue and burnt umber over each other to create a variety of luminous black values. Cadmium red sets the expression of most of the mouths. The compositions range from abstract to graphic. I painted just seven masks, but I could have painted endless compositions from countless possible images. All the images should be hung at eye level from left to right: *Meglo, Web, Jester, Bird, Snake, Frog and Cold*.

The audience has the task of recognizing the mask and placing a set of eyes in the black vacant spaces. The content of every painting will change according to the eyes seen by each viewer. For example, *Meglo*, (pg.18) may well be identified as pride, vanity or commerce without morality/prostitution; *Frog* (pg. 3) avarice, impotency or pleasure-without-conscience; *Snake* (pg.20) temptation, envy, or politics-without-principle. *Cold*, (pg.19) insensitivity, lust or science without humanity as Ghandi might have said. What the assigned identity is depends on the perception of whomever is making the identification and I hesitate to give titles to any of these paintings to avoid subliminal suggestions.

The viewer is subconsciously challenged to identify themselves -- a frightening task. Daily we look in the mirror seeing the face to which we assign our identity. Carefully we choose a mask we feel portrays the public image we wish to project. Rarely does the mirror suggest the mask as these paintings do. The impact of being revealed to oneself by a bizarre mirror image can be

riveting. I must admit I saw myself in some of those eyes. It was not comfortable being an external witness to myself. None the less, whatever mask we choose, those whom we meet see beyond the mask to what they believe is our true identity.















BARBIE'S HOUSE

Barbie's House evolved over a year's time. (pg. 25) It started with an experiment to use acrylics much the same as watercolors. Rather than using watercolor paper and a brush, I began spraying diluted acrylics on a large 6' x 4.5' ungressoed canvas. At first I avoided using white to maintain the transparent quality of my colors. Eventually I incorporated white to create pastels and tints. I found the process required enormous energy and concentration, as I feverishly sprayed and turned the canvas to float the colors across the picture plane. The process was repeated over the span of a few nights. Soft, harmonious color fields emerged. I was pleased with the results.

For a number of days, I would retreat to my studio to stare at and become lost in the tranquil color fields I had created. The painting was peaceful and it quietly filled me with joy. Then mysteriously one night I began to draw a beastly vision. I sketched on the wall next to the color field canvas. I shook with fear and dread. My breathing became labored and I was sweating profusely. Yet, I continued until something horrific stared back at me. And then I said somewhere deep inside myself, "You can no longer hide in obscurity, for I have revealed your face." I left the studio quite shaken.

Sometime later, summoning courage against a palpable dread, I painted

the conjured vision in a corner of my peaceful color field canvas. (pg. 26) I was overwhelmed as if I had challenged something that could tear me apart. My colleagues looked at the altered painting in a variety of ways. Some asked why I had destroyed a good painting with such an incongruent image. Others laughed asking who the “biker guy” was. And some said the image made them feel uncomfortable as they caught a glimpse of it while passing my studio. I could not answer these questions or offer any plausible reasons for my composition. Only my advisor, a man of great sensitivity, seemed to encourage me with his audible silence.

Soon after I painted what seemed like tall buildings in colors of yellow, purple and red. Dark windows and a large ramp like division emerged between the top and the bottom of the painting. I could not stop this painting. It began to paint itself, each day taking different directions. I did not know where the painting was going, and I realized this was being born in some subliminal place. I was the artist, but no longer the creator.

Some days I threw paint at the canvas with chaotic explosions, and others, tenderly rendered architectural elements and fragments of buildings. The gentle mood of the original painting became filled with anger and hostility until I notice all the colors had changed into discord. For some weeks I studied the painting attempting to understand what I had painted. Perhaps I had painted a mask...?

I drew snakes with fangs that reached out like hands poisoning everyone

they touch. I floated the vision and plunged the figure to a dark purple space. Rushing towards him is a red figure with an outstretched hand. The figure borders on the light and dark space implying ambiguity about their role and involvement with the apparition. (pg. 26) The Barbie Doll, a child's toy, floats up the ramp like an innocent angel. (pg. 27)

As I continued sporadically during the successive months, a structure bathed in light materialized in the upper left corner. (pg.27) It seemed so hopeful and the antithesis of the lower right corner. But the most puzzling of all was the placement and location of a tear in the painting. The word *tear* can be read two different ways: was this a tear like a tear drop, or a rent or a wound in the fabric? (The portal of the architectural element on the left side implies there is another level behind the one we see, as if the ramp and tall structures are a thin layer or fabric over something else. pg. 29) Within the tear itself an image appears. Some see a man with a raised left arm (lower 2/3's of tear) and some a lamb with drops of blood (upper 2/3's) . Some actually see both. (pg. 28)

Months passed and the more I painted the more I realized this was not a mask but a real portrait... of a soul. I quickly painted a human form surrounding the soul. The male human form is facing away and the fiend is towards the viewer. Humanity is the mask and the savage beast reveals the true metaphysical nature or identity of the composite image. It was the soul of an old bald man. I knew him well. He called himself Grampy. He was a pedophile and I was one of his victims.

In hindsight, the metamorphosis of this painting from peaceful color fields to what it is today, symbolizes my entire life from the birth of my consciousness until now. As I finished the painting I noticed I felt renewed. I no longer have private bouts of anxiety or depression. Life looks bright and my perspectives about everything have changed. Most importantly , I think, at least this once, I have survived a hell storm. Life really is a gift.











Tummy Ache

Tummy Ache (pg. 33) flowed on to the canvas in three and a half weeks. Before starting to paint, the content, images and techniques were clear in my mind. The background was developed in the same manner as *Barbie's House*. The overall mood of the painting was established by the orange and red colors and some of the canvas was left unpainted adding to the unsettling surreal atmosphere. I sketched the figures with watercolor pencil and left some of the original marks untouched to imply the metaphysical nature of the images. The figures were under painted in cobalt blue and glazed and scumbled with mars black for the robes and white for the masks. The cobalt blue of the child's dress unites her with the four adults. All the red sashes, etc. are under painted with white. Throughout this thesis I attempted to create a readable iconography differentiating the metaphysical from the corporeal, or spiritual from the material. Half completed floating bodies suggest the spiritual as opposed to corporeal forms anchored in or on earthly settings. The gothic structure in the right background also floats implying another dimension.

We are all born into circumstances beyond our control. Our consciousness awakens in response to this environment which will shape our thoughts, judgments and identity. We become aware of ourselves by processing

information from our senses into a “movie-in-the-brain” in which we are the “seen” (in the brain) and the “seer” (in the mind).⁵ In other words our brains identify who we are, by reading where we are (painful place/comfortable place).

Pain and comfort are remembered, and we become proactive rather than apathetic to our condition: we cry or sleep. We take personal ownership of the consciousness which arises from these encounters with our environment and we place ourselves above the environment. We recognize who we are by recognition of the environment: I am because I feel; ultimately, I am even if I don't feel. “..evolution has crafted a brain that is in the business of directly representing the organism and indirectly representing whatever the organism interacts with”, states Antonio R. Damasio in vol. 12 of 2002 *Scientific American*, page 8.

We have heard people say, “This is what *I* think. *I* am aware of *my* surroundings, and *I* have decided what *my* actions should be.” They want us to know these are *their* ideas, not someone else's. They are taking ownership of their consciousness by speaking in the first person singular. Ownership of our consciousness leads us to make personal judgments about what is safe , comfortable and utilitarian. But does it lead to a personal code of ethics: what is right and what is wrong? Here in lies the intended content of the above stated painting. How can we be held responsible for our identity and actions if a code of behavior depends solely on information from our senses. ? Does rightness feel good, and does wrongness actually present the senses with physical feelings.

Old sensory input becomes *our* memories or *our* learned lessons. When the old memories no longer apply to current situations we process the new sensory information and our brains map out a new consciousness. We change our minds. However, if incoming information is contradicted by those around us, our *brains* remain hardwired or etched , and we are unable to escape the old recycled messages sent by the brain. It's simple molecular chemistry according the 2002 Special Edition of Scientific American. We now are conflicted about our identity. It takes great effort and introspection on the part of the conscious self to force the *mind* to recognize the erroneous recycled memories of the *brain*, and then ignore them.

Much of what we become is predetermined by those around us and the choices they have made during their lives. More profoundly, we are subject to generations of choices. The child in *Tummy Ache* senses the wrongness of the sensory input being received from the people around her. She feels sick. She is conflicted. She is surrounded, indeed corralled, by two dysfunctional generations: her parents and grandparents. All four adults wear their spiritually warped identity. The question is , despite our fondest hopes, will her unavoidable life environment gnarl and gnash at her child face, scaring it, too, into a mask? Will she be perpetually conflicted or will she find the strength to break the cycle of dysfunction and realize, as an adult, her true identity? I have suggested my answer to this question throughout the body of this written text. It is ,however, up to the viewers of *Tummy Ache* to draw their own conclusions.



Conclusion

“..there are two kinds of people, one uneducated and coarse, which always places utility before honor, and the other humane and civilized, which places honor before everything. Before the latter kind are set forth merit, honor, glory, trustworthiness, justice, and all the virtues, while before the former are set the gain and enjoyment of profit. And even pleasure, which is the greatest enemy of virtue and which adulterates the nature of the good by fallaciously imitating it, and which is followed most passionately by those who are most gross, who place it not only before honorable things but also before necessities...”⁴

Marcus Tillius Cicero
Genres of Rhetoric

Beyond the Rose Garden has been considered by some to be a successful political satire. My aim was not to be funny when I started the project. But, satire, though not easy, may be the best way to engage a conflicted public into listening to an opinion. And if you can pull it off, the satisfaction is immeasurable.

For most of my life I have studied science: postulate, research, experiment, document, prove. It demands precision, exactitude and discipline. I tend to understand and enjoy the frontal attack of science to dilemma. Its demands are concise with unequivocal answers of “yes” or “no”. It doesn't tolerate variables nor ambiguous undocumented conclusions. So, *Mask Task* was an intriguing joining of art and science. The public asks the questions, supplies the answers and hopefully makes the deductions, none of which are documented.

Barbie's House provided a solution to questions Science could not answer. Only Art can expose the subconscious. It provides the soul a language by which it communicates with the conscious. Without Art we can never comprehend the composite corporeal and metaphysical being.

[160] Prudence is the knowledge of what is good, what is bad, and what is neutral. Its parts are *memoria*, *intelligentia*, and *providentia* [memory, intelligence, and providence--or perhaps, hindsight, insight, and foresight]. Memory is that by which the spirit returns to what has been; intelligence is that by which it sees through what is; "providence" is that by which something that will be is seen before it has been done.⁵

Marcus Tilius Cicero
Cicero on the Genres of Rhetoric

Scientific American utilizes math and physics to map out and prove what Cicero postulated thousands of years ago. We do indeed have a personal consciousness born of our memories (resulting from pain, fear and comfort), which are reprocessed by our intelligence (if, and how do these memories apply to here and now) to solving problems (where should I be and how should I act in the future). However, there does seem to be important unanswered question. Why are humans the only living things on this planet to develop a code of ethics? And why do we (humans) take ownership of our consciousness and personal responsibility of this code since other brains in other species function in the same biochemical and molecular fashion? In other words, what makes humans aware that some acts are good and others are bad?

Tummy Ache suggests the soul is never maligned by circumstances ,

though it is clothed in garments of thought, word and action. These garments can mask our identity unless we are willing to challenge their veracity. Taking responsibility for the output of our “computerized brain”, is indeed a function of the spiritual aspect of being a human. Somewhere between Pavlovian response and purposeful, premeditated response, lies the entire answer to the question; “Why are we here?” And Art may be the only way to illumination.

“A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory - and very few eyes can see the mystery of his life - a life like the scriptures- figurative. ”⁶

John Keats
Letter to G. and G. Keats
14 Feb. - 3 May 1819

Allegory: description of one thing under the image of another..a story in which people, things and happenings have a hidden or symbolic meanings: allegories are used for teaching or explaining ideas, moral principles , any symbol or emblem⁷

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